



ROCK ART: SILHOUETTES FIGURING ON THE STAGE OF PREHISTORIC MAN

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Abstract - Rock art: silhouettes figuring on the stage of prehistoric man

Rock Art in Italy is present in various sites located particularly in the Alpine region; the wall art is located in the peninsula and in the islands.

The iconography encompass different types of signs carved and painted on rock surfaces, usually in the open air; the pleistocene art is mostly in the cave. The signs represent naturalistic, sub-naturalistic figures and geometric or abstract forms.

In this presentation a hermeneutic hypothesis is proposed, starting from the consideration that the signs at present visible are the residuum of a more complex phenomenon, a "total social fact" (Mauss) proper to the Prehistoric world, comprising noticeably prayers, gestures, discourse, dances, sounds and music - realities of course which leave no fossil traces!

In particular the ceremonies organically linked to rock 'art' cannot be seen to-day but thanks to hermeneutical horizons it is possible to plausibly (in homage to the Plato's Cave) high light and throw into relief the silhouettes figuring on the stage of Prehistoric Man. Concrete examples are presented considering the Palaeolithic groups of art in Italy as a communication systems, site by site.

Riassunto - Arte rupestre: le silhouettes che si mossero sul palcoscenico dell'uomo preistorico

In Italia, l'arte rupestre è presente in svariate località, particolarmente nell'area alpina; l'arte parietale è dislocata nella penisola e nelle isole. L'iconografia comprende differenti tipi di segni incisi o dipinti sulle superfici rocciose, per lo più all'aria aperta; l'arte pleistocenica è prevalentemente in caverna. I segni rappresentano figure naturalistiche, sub-naturalistiche e forme geometriche e/o astratte.

Questa presentazione propone una ipotesi ermeneutica che parte dalla considerazione che il segno visibile oggi sia il residuo di un fenomeno più complesso, un "fatto totale" (per dirla alla Marcel Mauss) attinente al mondo preistorico, comprendente preghiere, gesti, discorsi, danze, suoni e musica, tutte realtà che ovviamente non lasciano tracce fossili!

Ovviamente le cerimonie organicamente connesse all'arte rupestre non possono essere viste oggi, ma grazie a coordinate ermeneutiche è possibile e plausibile (in omaggio alla caverna di Platone) rischiarare e mettere in rilievo le silhouettes che si mossero sul proscenio dell'Uomo Preistorico. Sono presentati, sito per sito, esempi concreti che considerino gruppi di arte Paleolitica in Italia come sistemi di comunicazione.

Résumé - Art rupestre : les silhouettes qui figurent sur la scène de l'homme préhistorique

L'art rupestre est présent dans différentes localités italiennes, surtout dans la région alpine ; l'art pariétal se retrouve surtout dans la péninsule et dans les îles. L'iconographie comprend différents types de signes gravés ou peints sur les surfaces rocheuses, généralement en plein air : l'art pléistocène se trouve principalement dans des grottes. Les signes représentent des figures naturalistes, sub-naturalistes et des formes géométriques et/ou abstraites.

Cette présentation propose une hypothèse herméneutique qui part de la considération que le signe que l'on peut voir aujourd'hui est ce qui reste d'un phénomène plus complexe, d'un « fait total » (pour reprendre les termes de Marcel Mauss) relatif au monde préhistorique et comprenant des prières, des gestes, des discours, des danses, des sons et de la musique. Ce sont autant de réalités qui, évidemment, ne laissent pas de traces fossiles !

Bien entendu, les cérémonies organiquement liées à l'art rupestre ne sont plus visibles aujourd'hui, mais grâce à des herméneutiques coordonnées, il est possible et plausible (en hommage à la caverne de Platon), d'éclairer et de mettre en relief les silhouettes qui se déplaçaient sur l'avant-scène de l'Homme préhistorique. Site par site, nous trouvons des exemples concrets qui considèrent les groupes d'art paléolithique en Italie comme des systèmes de communication.

INTRODUCTION

In a particular moment of Man's history on our planet, the phenomenon of Rock Art appeared, more or less 40,000 years ago, formed by signs projected on rocky surfaces, in caves, in shelters or in the open air. The typology is vast and varied: from figurative naturalistic and descriptive signs to abstract geometric and symbolic notations.

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This huge amount of signs that men have impressed on the surrounding world is not the result of an immediate transformation of Homo Sapiens's intellectual activity, but is the effect of the maturation of a long cognitive process based on the psychic dimension and comporting stages leading to a more enlarged Self knowledge, grounded in reflexively deepening thought associated with the knowledge of another world perceived as separated from or discontinuous with human personality.

A symptom of this abstract thinking could be located in stone artefacts, e.g. the bifaces, denoting a research of symmetry and aesthetics, far removed from mere functionality, already noticeable in Lower Palaeolithic times.

There is an evolutionary momentum inclining Man to prove his worth over and against Nature, as arbiter and modifier of reality, despite his being from time to time overcome by the force of wild animals, by atmospheric and telluric events – this possibly being the reason why he has often submitted himself to the numinous, to the sacred, to the extra-human, the super-human, or the divine – in a word the transcendent other.

So, rock art is the vehicle of intermediation and of communication between two worlds, one transcendent, the other spiritual, the kingdom of the sacred and divine versus the kingdom of man, the effective world, real, tangible and concrete, where the daily drama of life unfolds.

Rock Art, for over a century now, is the object of scientific studies, decoding, discussions, and disputes, sometimes passionate.

Our horizon is certainly today more vast than in the past: the discoveries are multiplied in every continent; some sites have disappeared or been destroyed. But an impressive number of new districts of rock art are being discovered, the increase of documentation is exponential and would seem at times to follow a developing curb worthy of a pandemic!

The aim of our past Masters was the magisterial management of all disciplinary knowledge; this goal is now in crisis, owing to the flood of empirical evidence available on the net.

THE SCIENCE OF SIGNS

To undertake the study of Rock Art, some basic concepts from the science of signs are useful to navigate on the ocean of information that is presently disposable. They are crucial in trying to answer the first of the three fundamental questions confronting mankind: from where do we come?

The universe represented by the whole complex of rock art requires pragmatic research or empirical study of the origins of the signs used and of the effects in relation to the hypothetic or conjectured behaviour that they may have provoked; our semantics is therefore the analysis of rock signs taking into account the different manners of making sense by material signs; syntactic approach is the combinatory study between signs, over and above their specific significance and their relation to behaviour (the expressions and the gestures intended or induced).

In this sense Saussure conceive Semiology as a general science of signs, in the overarching frame of the social psychology. The sign, according to Saussure, does not link a thing to a name, but a concept to an imagined; it is like a medal with two faces, signifié-signifiant, and the relationship is fixed on the base of an abstract system of rules, la langue, that springs from collective use. This fact presuppose that all the members of a particular society give an identical value to the various signs which become true "codes", rigid and conventional, namely a system of correspondence between significant and significations.

Semiotics, in this sense, is proposed as a general theory of culture and of social environment; the communicative process is defined in turn – at the level of elementary structure – as an information model, a "total social fact" (Mauss).

Concerning Rock Art, since we are confronted with situations that derive their peculiar characters in connection with space, with time and with different individuals that interact within a complex of signs, it is possible to utilize theoretic patterns deriving from the semiologic and meta-linguistic fields.

Rock Art is located at the top of the antinomy nature/culture: by slight interventions, by little superficial modifications on the cave walls, shelter, open air rocks, man has transformed the territory creating the sacred panorama, an operation of enormous political, economic, and social importance.

Today Rock Art is a mere relict, the surviving datum of a complex cultural construction from which time and memory have erased nearly all the vital component parts; rites, sounds, songs, mimed actions, do not leave traces; oral tradition and bodily gesture don't fossilize!

The iconographies traced on soils, on sands, on skins, on bark, wood, leaves, textiles, on adobe plaster, have often not resisted the passage of time, and most are definitively lost.

Only Rock Art, exactly because it is rock solid, has been conserved and gives us the data –for over 30,000 years- on one aspect of the cognitive activities of man as a symbolic thinker: there are sufficient few surviving signs on rock to connote culturally the territory – even the most desolate and desert – and for the re-emersion of peculiar landscapes, the hearth and homeland of man, for us to read minimally today.

There are special places associated with prehistoric art where the numinous and the supernatural present their epiphanies and where often rock art still exists today as the surviving sign of sacredness and of rituals that have suffered the ruin of time.

The multiple valences, the relationships and the symbolic connections that were existed between imagination and surroundings have almost completely disappeared, but still persist the specific characters of the rock phenomenon that enable us to insert it in the category of the religious - taking the term at its etymological value namely the “being bound together” – rock art thus still echoes the social life of communities in the remote past.

In fixing a centre that organizes the territory, and then orders the universe drawing out from the primordial chaos, the “internal” territory is established in all its reassuring familiarity, a reliable source of daily living in opposition to the “external” territory, unknown and untrustworthy, peopled with prevalently hostile forces.

“Powerful places” instanced by the presence of Rock Art, considered as *genius loci* present us with data relating to a fundamental phenomenon of the human culture: landscaping. In the light of these considerations, landscape is not simply a portion of territory or a geographical notion, but assumes the valence of the highly spiritual building up of Humanity.

And it is exactly in this open theatre formed by rock art sites that is possible to make a museum of the most ancient cognitive activity of Man.

PALAEOLITHIC CAVE ART IN ITALY

During the last century, and particularly after the Second World War, the evidence of prehistoric art has increased, in particular relative to the Upper Paleolithic and to the Post- Paleolithic.

Some Centers have focused on Prehistoric Art, with the role networking the institutions devoted to rock art in the four corners of the world; in this way an extraordinary progress was made possible thanks to the new scientific collection of data, meetings, publications and vulgarization; the initiative is still very active and hopes to continue to be so in the future.

In Italy, a pioneer in the prehistoric art field was Prof. Paolo Graziosi, an anthropologist of Florence University, supporter of the Istituto Italiano di Preistoria e Protostoria, the Italian department of the international UISPP – UNESCO. Graziosi’s professor in Florence was the Pinerolese Prof. Silvio Pons; together with Giovanni Marro and Piero Barocelli, they founded the CeSMAP, Study Center and Museum of Prehistoric Art of Pinerolo together with the Anthropological Institute in the Turin University.

Paolo Graziosi focused on some particularities of Palaeolithic Prehistoric Art in Italy, placed mainly in the coastal caves of the peninsula as well as in some islands – the whole constituting a sort of “Mediterranean Province”. Since the 1950’s in Italy only one cave with parietal engraved figures has been thoroughly investigated: the Romanelli Cave, near Castro in Terra d’Otranto, discovered in 1905.

The Romanelli Cave in the Puglia region presents a series of carved figures on the walls and on the ceiling of the cavern. One can see a bovine semi-naturalistic, synthetically outlined, and other schematic – geometric figure similar to the stylized silhouettes of women and vulva.

In the succeeding decennials after further discoveries were made: the Paglicci Cave, in the Gargano peninsula, Puglia; the Cala dei Genovesi Cave, in the Levanzo island; the Addaura and Nisemi Caves, at Monte Pellegrino near Palermo, and minor sites in the Palermo and Trapani area (Za Minica, Dei Puntali, Racchio and Isolidda caves); the Romito Shelter in Papasidero, Calabria; the Caviglione Cave, at the Balzi Rossi in Liguria.

The caves containing parietal art, linked to the Upper Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic horizons, afford mainly carved signs; only few possess paintings notably the Paglicci and Levanzo Caves. In a few grottoes it was possible to connect the archaeological levels to the wall decorations.

The Paglicci Cave has paintings, discovered by Francesco Zorzi and Franco Mazzena in 1961, located in the deepest and darkest part of the cavern, in a sort of niche. Some positive prints of hands in red color can be seen together with two complete figures of horses, plus a cervical-dorsal line of an equine, still visible in red ochre.



Silhouettes and anatomical details are clearly underscored; the big abdomens denote possibly images of “pregnant” mares.

The figurative stylema of the France-cantabrian type, also present in various lithic carved plaquettes found *in situ* in the cave at archaeological levels, can be located on Gravettian and Epigravettian horizons.

The Cala dei Genovesi Cave is located in the Levanzo island, in the Egadi Archipelago, about 30 meters above the actual sea level; was discovered by Anna Vigliardi, Francesca Minellono and Paolo Graziosi in the 1950. About 30 Palaeolithic engravings have been recorded, almost all in naturalistic style, animals of small dimensions (from 15 to 30 cm) and only 4, (three carved and one painted in red ochre), are anthropomorphic. Between the zoomorphic figures there are cervideus, bovideus and equideus.

The archaeological layers of the Cala dei Genovesi, relate to Epipalaeolithic horizons and can be associated with the parietal figures which date from the end of the Pleistocene, when the sea level was about 40 meters lower than today – the site being then an isthmus whose surviving element is the present day islet of Levanzo.

In the 1952 Jole Marconi and Luigi Bernabò Brea discovered prehistoric carvings in the small cave of the Addaura, on the slopes of Mount Pellegrino, near Palermo, in Sicily. The sunlit cave has revealed a “unicum” in Pleistocene art: scenes where concentrated in the middle human figures prevail, surrounded by marginal figures of animals. The stylemas are “veristic-like” with about ten figures delineated by contour lines, skillfully made.

A few meters away is a second cave (Addaura II) presenting, deeply carved, two profiles of bovides.

In 1954, still on the Monte Pellegrino, but on the slope facing Palermo, another small cave, (Nisemi) was discovered, containing carved figures, two horses and three bovides, similar to the representations of the Levanzo and Addaura sites. In the nearby Puntali Cave figures of two equideous and one cervideous can be found.

In 1961 Agostino Miglio discovered animalistic figures in the large Romito Shelter, near Papa-sidero in Calabria. A strong archaeological deposit present in the shelter and in the cave, have enabled accurate chrono-cultural evaluations relating to an Epipalaeolithic times.

On the boulder located to the western end of the shelter are placed the animalistic figures between the most impressive, masterly and esthetically highest realization of the whole Palaeolithic verism. A large figure of bovideous or bull is carved by a deep V line, sure and masterly delineated in a lateral profile. The anatomic details (nostrils, mouth, eye, cutaneous folds, cracked hoofs, penis and scrotum) are veristic and of exceptional quality.

The caves on the border between Liguria and Cote d’Azur, on the Tyrrhenian littoral, have been studied and excavated since the first half of the XIX century. But the discovery of the Palaeolithic art in these caves is relatively recent, 1971; thanks to the surveys of Giuseppe Vicino, linear and geometric signs have been found, such as vulvae and phallic schemes, and an outstanding carved figure of a horse in naturalistic style, outlined in lateral perspective, associated with linear strokes deeply carved by the “polissoir” technique.

The parietal Pleistocene art in Italy, present particularly in the South of the peninsula and in the Mediterranean Sicilian islands, constitutes an ensemble of forms presenting naturalistic, sub-naturalistic (zoomorphic and anthropomorphic) stylemes and abstract or geometric signs.

Chronologically, this important phenomenon extends over a long period of time - over 10,000 years, starting from a complete facies of Gravettian Era dated 22,000 years B. C. to the end of the Epipalaeolithic, about 11,000 years ago.

This general analytic frame of Italian Prehistoric cave Art can be largely referred to the studies of Paolo Graziosi in the 1970’s and remains today the fundamental synthesis, although ulterior studies (particularly by Margherita Mussi, University of Rome, Fabio Martini, University of Florence, Annamaria Ronchitelli, University of Siena, Sebastiano Tusa, Superintendency of Sicily, Filippo Gambari, Angiolo del Lucchese and Giuseppe Vicino, Superintendency of Liguria), and surveys of detail are contributing to a more refined definition of Pleistocene Art in Italy.

The projection that we often risk to apply to Prehistoric Art, reminds us of the masterly warning by André Leroi-Gourhan: “to avoid putting in the mouth of prehistoric man Bantu words pronounced with European accent”.

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Fig. 1 – Rituals of today. Navajo sand paintings, similar to Tibetan sand mandalas, are created on the floor of the hogan under the direction of the shaman. Before the sun sets, the sand painting is erased and swept onto a blanket to be carried outside. (Photo Navajo National Museum)



Fig. 2 - Romanelli Cave. The Romanelli Cave in the Puglia region presents a series of carved figures on the walls and on the ceiling of the cavern. One can see a bovideous semi-naturalistic, synthetically outlined, and other schematic – geometric figure similar to the stylized silhouettes of women and vulva. (Photo Paolo Graziosi)



Fig. 3 - Cala dei Genovesi Cave. About 30 Palaeolithic engravings have been recorded, almost all in naturalistic style, animals of small dimensions (from 15 to 30 cm). Between the zoomorphic figures there are cervideus. (Photo Paolo Graziosi)



Fig. 4 - Cala dei Genovesi Cave. A carved figure of bovideus. (Photo Paolo Graziosi)



Fig. 5 - Paglicci Cave. The Paglicci Cave has paintings, located in the deepest and darkest part of the cavern, in a sort of niche. Two vertical figures of horses in red ochre. (Photo Franco Mezzena)



Fig. 6 – Addaura Cave. On the slopes of Mount Pellegrino, near Palermo, in Sicily, the cave has revealed a “unicum” in Pleistocene art: scenes where concentrated in the middle human figures prevail, surrounded by marginal figures of animals. (Photo Paolo Graziosi)

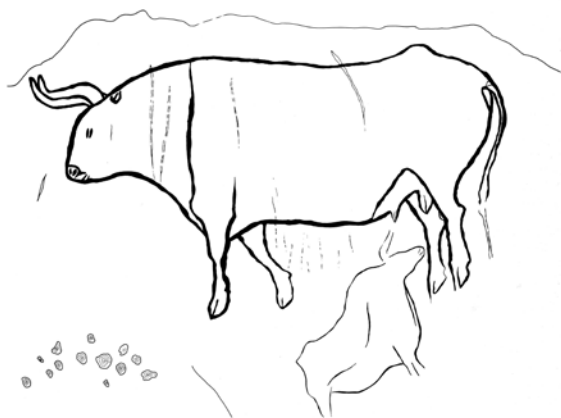


Fig. 7 - Romito Shelter. Near Papisidero in Calabria, on a boulder in the shelter, a large figure of bovideous or bull is carved by a deep V line, sure and masterly delineated in a lateral profile. (Tracing by Dario Seglie - Tere Grindatto, CeSMAP, 1974)



Fig. 8 - Caviglione Cave. An outstanding carved figure of a horse in naturalistic style, outlined in lateral perspective, associated with linear strokes deeply carved by the "polissoir" technique. (Photo Giuseppe Vicino)

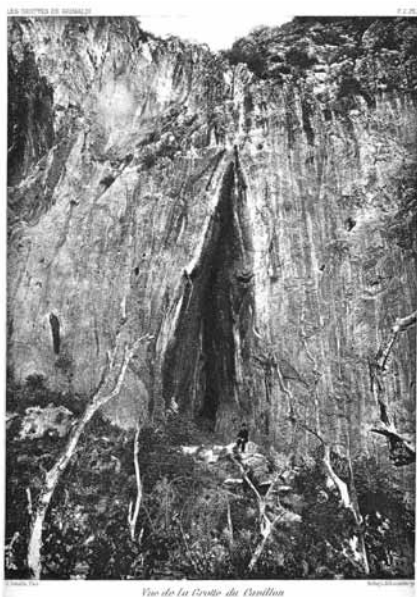


Fig. 9 - Caviglione Cave. The caves on the border between Liguria and Cote d'Azur, on the Tyrrhenian littoral, have been studied and excavated since the first half of the XIX century. But the discovery of the Palaeolithic art in these caves is relatively recent, 1971. (Archive Giuseppe Vicino)